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ABSTRACT

When looking back at the 1998 presidential debates, political reformers should reconsider the sponsorship and direction of future presidential debates. There is no debate about the need for presidential debates, especially in light of the increasing involvement by media handlers, but the debate should continue over which institution should "institutionalize" the debates in 1992. Political reformers should review three important needs for future debates: first, the need for more interaction between the candidates; second, the need for less formal and less rehearsed debates; and third, the need to involve the public in the discussion of the issues. The League of Women Voters is best suited to guarantee that future debates serve the public interest. The League has one primary goal--to promote an informed electorate. In the 1988 debates, where the political parties controlled the format, they failed to demonstrate that they were capable of presenting a fair and educational forum. The League, on the other hand, would focus the debates on public issues and concerns, such as education, the homeless, and foreign policy, which were issues that were missing from the 1988 debates. (MS)

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DEBATING THE DEBATES

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Twenty minutes after the UCLA presidential debate I joined a pack of information hungry journalists surrounding James Baker III, Bush campaign director in what was called the "spin pit." Baker was one of several "spin doctors" providing commentary on his candidate's debate performance. One of the journalists in the pack asked: "How do you feel about the Vice-President's strong statement on future debates:" Baker grinned and replied, "It was just as if Bush read my lips, "NO MORE DEBATES!" I agree with Mr Baker-- I hope the American public does not have to endure another made-for-television presidential debate.

Nancy Neuman, president of the League of Women Voters predicted in 1987 that "if the parties sponsor the debates, we will have two canned campaign commercials that will go on for 90 minutes. Neuman's prediction came true- the UCLA debate was a carefully staged political pillow fight between a pair of candidates who repeated rehearsed statements and attempted to appear "likable" for the television audience.

As we look back at 1988 "The Year of the Debates," political reformers should reconsider the sponsorship and direction of future presidential debates. There is no debate about the need for presidential (and vice-presidential) debates, especially in light of the increasing involvement by media handlers. But the debate should continue over

which institution should "institutionalize" the debates in 1992.

Political reformers should review three important needs for future presidential debates: first, the need for more interaction between the candidates; second, the need for less formal and less rehearsed debates; and third, the need to involve the public in the discussion of the issues.

The League of Women Voters is best suited to guarantee that future debates serve the public interest. The League has one primary goal- to promote an informed electorate. The bipartisan Commission on Presidential Debates is controlled by self interested party members and corporate sponsors. The list of major donors to the Commission include the following: AT&T, Banker's Trust, Ford Motor Company, IBM, J.C. Penney, Prudential, and Xerox. Party members have one major goal- to elect their candidate. It was obvious in the UCLA debate that educating the public about important presidential issues was not a high priority.

Party professionals failed to demonstrate that they were capable of presenting a fair and educational forum. The media asked very few questions concerned with presidential issues, i.e., education, the homeless, foreign policy, and the candidates often responded with memorized statements that were vaguely related to the questions asked. According to Neuman, "it is no secret that debates create more anxiety for party chairs and campaign managers than does any other preelection event. To the campaigns and the political parties it makes sense to want to want to control the debates--currently the only campaign tool not

already in the parties' kit-- to shield their candidates and to package the events as best they can."

This year's pre-debate negotiations failed to produce the four scheduled presidential debates. The League abandoned its support of the second presidential debate because both parties were making unreasonable demands dealing with the question format, audience selection, and placement of lighting and props. The Commission decided to give in to the parties' demands and host the Los Angeles debate.

The League is experienced with self interested debate negotiations. In the 1984 election the candidates were allowed to strike proposed debate panelists from a list provided by the League. The parties together rejected 83 names and the League went public with details of the campaign abuses the day before the first debate in Lexington, Kentucky. The external pressure forced the parties to negotiate their differences. The League demonstrated that it could manage difficult negotiations.

Another concern with Commission sponsorship involves the threat of non-involvement by future candidates. In a 1986 seminar on presidential debates at Harvard University, Walter Mondale described a future secenario where a candidate believes that participation in a televised debate would jeopardize his success in the election. The candidate goes to the party chair and suggests that he is interested in appointing the chair to a cabinet position after the election. The candidate finishes the conversation with a comment that he does not

want to participate in a televised debate. In this situation the party chair may quietly decide to reject the Commission's debate plans.

Mondale went on to say that if the president of the League was asked to cut a deal the issue would quickly become a matter of public record. In an interview with columnist, David Broder, Mondale concluded, "What forces a candidate to debate is the threat that his recalcitrance will be made public (by the sponsoring organization). If the parties are handling the arrangements, a candidate would be able to wiggle out, by having the party representatives make impossible demands, while appearing publicly to be cooperative."

I feel the League is more qualified to sponsor the debates. The League has sponsored hundreds of debates on a local, state and national level and has a full understanding of the games party officials play in arranging debates. The League has been in the business of nonpartisan voter education for 68 years. The CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER reported that voters polled before the 1984 election said that in 1988 they would like more unbiased information about the candidates. A 1984 MEDIA GENERAL-ASSOCIATED PRESS survey concluded that voters wanted more in-depth campaign coverage, more personal appearances and more debates in future presidential campaigns. And a 1987 Roosevelt Center study of citizen attitudes in Iowa and New Hampshire found a public that is "cynical and angry" about the political process and a public that feels it is being "manipulated" by media handlers and television images. The League

always checks the public pulse for potential debate issues and reform.

Last year a League study indicated that American voters thought that debate questions should be drawn from the American public. The League developed a joint study with American Viewpoint and Hamilton, Frederick & Schneiders to assess voter perceptions and opinions about the debates. The League was prepared to focus this year's debates on public issues and concerns. I would much rather listen to public oriented questions than biased, self serving questions from media panelists.

John W. Gardner, former president of the Carnegie Foundation wrote: "Ghost-written speeches, skillfully produced television spots, ingeniously contrived "photo opportunities" contribute to a manufactured product. In the case of the presidency, enormous effort goes into maintaining the manufactured image . . . so the public is deprived of the opportunity so cherished in a free society to exercise its native judgment in choosing the candidate who meets its needs. It knows its needs. But it does not know the candidates." Are we better informed about the candidates today than we were four years ago?